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SUBJECT: A HIKE THROUGH LEOPARD TERRITORY

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[1](#)1. (U) Consulate staff hiked through World Wildlife Foundation's (WWF) leased forest in Barabash on August 17. The trail takes about two hours and includes information on the leopard habitat and how the forests of the Far East have changed. The forests are much more diverse than in northern Russia, with iron, yellow, and white (Manchurian) birch, elm, Manchurian Pine and oak. The mix of trees in the forest is critical for leopard and tiger survival. Pine nuts, for example, are a staple for the wild boar that is the foundation of the tiger diet. For the leopard, the favorite habitat is 200 to 300 year old virgin forest with oak, Korean pine, and abundant grass for deer, raccoon, badgers, and other prey. WWF is planting pine in hopes of changing the forest mix, but it will take many years for the project to be fully implemented. Pine nuts, like many forest products, are harvested illegally and sold to China. WWF is working with local firms to develop ways to sustainably harvest pine nuts and other forest products and they are working to label these products as "tiger friendly." Most of the wood that is illegally harvested and exported to China winds up in furniture in Wal-Mart and other U.S. chains.

[1](#)2. (U) The hike itself is a perfect introduction for school children into the importance of conservation and the rich natural heritage that they still enjoy in the Far East. The students respond with beautiful artwork dedicated to the leopards and they are forceful advocates for the environment with their parents and teachers. Given that changing the forest is such a long term endeavor, working with local young people is an excellent strategy.

[1](#)3. (U) WWF's has two immediate goals. First, to put three separate conservation areas in Primorye under one national forest reserve umbrella. That project is moving forward with Vice Minister Ivanov's blessing and encouragement. Although that project looks hopeful, Dennis Smirnov, WWF specialist, cautions that there is a lot of infighting between local reserves so the union of these protected forest areas is far from certain. The other goal is to provide some tunnels or bridges that allow the leopards to move back and forth through their range where a new highway is being built. The highway will link Vladivostok with North Korea, and it bisects the leopard territory. Inbreeding is already a critical problem, and isolating the leopards into two groups on either side of the road would probably spell the end for the leopards. WWF does not favor introducing captive leopards into the wild population because the range is too small to support more leopards.

[1](#)4. (U) WWF is also working to reduce illegal logging by taking core samples of Far Eastern trees so that they can identify where the wood is coming from. Then they will know if wood from forest preserves is being illegally sold. WWF's other challenge is working with North Korean and Chinese partners to try to ban the flow of tiger and leopard parts into China. The Far Eastern Border Guard Directorate is involved in WWF leopard and tiger projects, as wild cats often migrate across the border to the neighboring northern province of China.

15. (U) WWF has rented some 40 thousand hectares of forest in Khasanskiy Rayon to use as a model territory to implement its programs on the sustainable use of natural resources, wildfire protection and forest restoration. Farmers use fire to clear agricultural land, but the fires inevitably spread to the forests. Smirnov said 99 percent of the fires in the Russian Far East are caused by man. A special program on protection of Korean pine includes pine planting, banning pine logging, and increasing public awareness of the importance of pine for Primorye's ecosystem. Another forest creature, the forest cat, is so secretive that WWF does not know anything about its numbers or habits, but they do have photographs that were tripped remotely so the forest cats do inhabit Far Eastern Forests. The cameras are also useful in identifying and tracking the habits of individual leopards. While no leopards were spotted (inevitable leopard pun--sorry!) on this trip, it is evident that the leopards have some strong supporters in the area and that WWF is making some gains politically. Whether it will be enough to save the world's most endangered big cat remains to be seen.

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